

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

CONTENTS

NOVELETTE

THE BLUFF <i>by Henry Slesar</i>	141
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SHORT STORIES

AFTER THE VERDICT <i>by Edward D. Hoch</i>	2
GOODBYE, SWEET MONEY <i>by Jack Ritchie</i>	19
THE MOST UNUSUAL SNATCH <i>by Lawrence Block</i>	23
POACHERS' ISLAND <i>by Richard Hardwick</i>	35
TIME ELEMENT <i>by Clark Howard</i>	44
POLTERGEIST <i>by W. Sherwood Hartman</i>	55
THE HANDYMAN <i>by Clayton Matthews</i>	61
IN LIEU OF TIME-THREE <i>by Jerry Jacobson</i>	73
THE POWER OF DEDUCTION <i>by John Reese</i>	81
UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES <i>by Bob Bristow</i>	93
A WOMAN'S INTUITION <i>by Richard O. Lewis</i>	98
HAPPY BIRTHDAY <i>by Al McGarry</i>	108
SEE AND TELL <i>by Mary Linn Roby</i>	116
GOOD FOR THE SOUL <i>by Jack Morrison</i>	129
CATCH AS SKETCH CAN <i>by Roy Lennard Nicholson</i>	137

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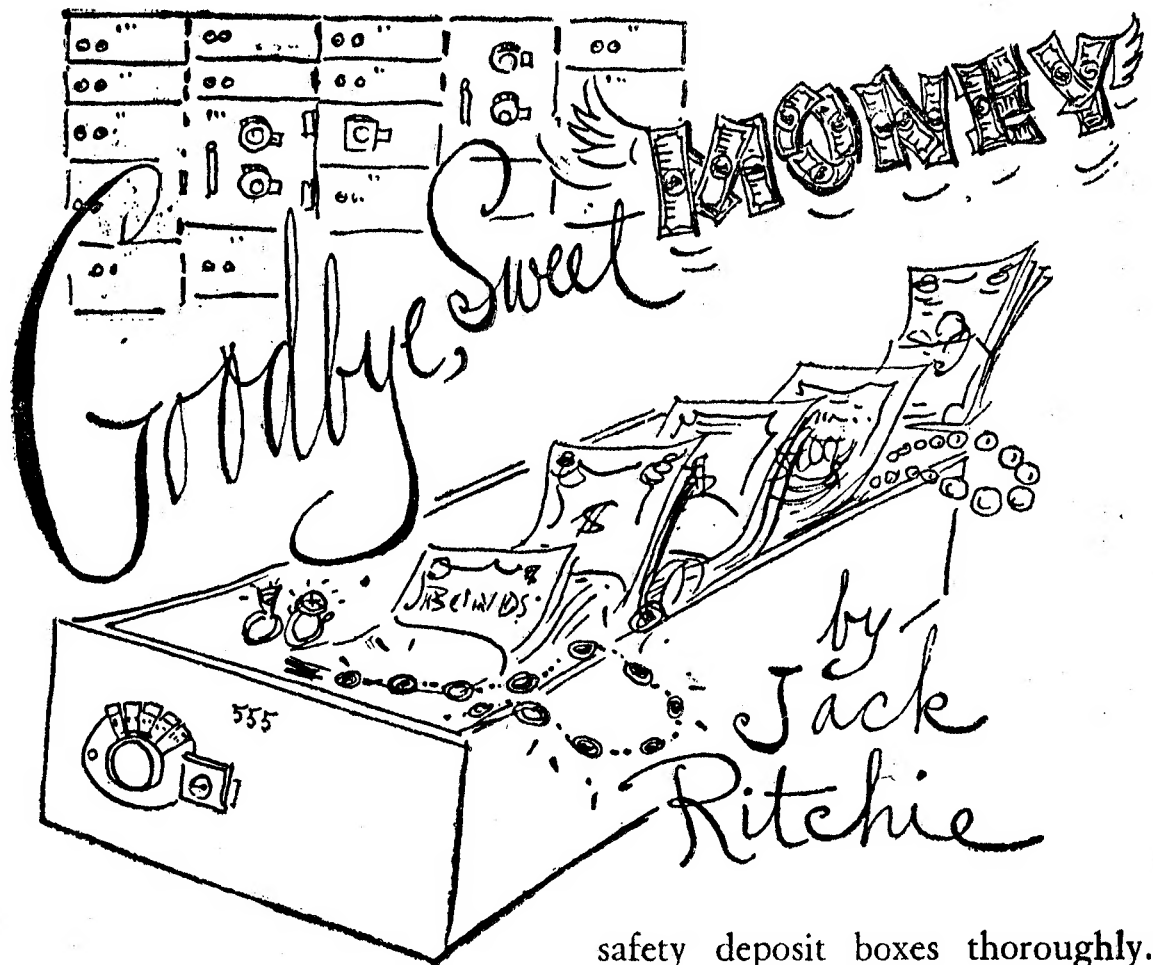
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The bite of a flea is uncomfortable, to be sure, but at least it lacks the piercing anguish of the whole dog.



SERGEANT Harrison came into Peabody's office, nodded in my direction, and then spoke to Peabody. "You're positive nothing was taken from the vault itself?"

"Positive," Peabody said. "It was untouched. But unfortunately the thief did manage to rifle most of the

safety deposit boxes thoroughly."

"Anything besides cash missing?"

"I haven't interviewed all of the victims yet, but so far it appears that he specialized in cash alone. After all, we're just a branch bank in the suburbs. We don't have all that concrete and metal and the elaborate alarm systems the main office has," Peabody said.

Harrison gloomily agreed. "Apparently he broke into the safety deposit box room after the last employee left Saturday afternoon. He had all of the weekend to work, and I guess he did." Harrison

Dr. Reagan and his wife were both in their late twenties.

"Just what kind of a bank do you run here?" Reagan demanded.

"It's a branch bank," Peabody said. "We don't have the metal



chewed his cigar. "Have you figured out how much money was stolen?"

"Not yet," Peabody said.

After Harrison left, Peabody's secretary, Miss Hinckle, came into the room. "Dr. Reagan and his wife are here."

Peabody sighed. "I simply hate speaking to angry people."

Miss Hinckle was plain, protective, and soothing. "Just try to think of it as part of the job."

"I'll try to, Miss Hinckle," Peabody said. "Please show them in."

and the concrete and alarms . . ."

Mrs. Reagan was as angry as her husband. "But you *do* have insurance, don't you?"

"Good heavens, yes," Peabody said. "We're insured to a fare-thee-well. However, concerning cash in safety deposit boxes, the coverage does not . . ." He stopped. "By the way, what did you lose? Jewelry? Bonds?"

"Good hard cash," Reagan snapped. "Forty thousand dollars."

Peabody raised an eyebrow. "Really? Are you *positive*?"

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Reagan exploded. "You're damn right I'm positive."

I cleared my throat. "Dr. Reagan, according to our records, you finished your internship fairly recently and have been in private practice three years." I consulted a sheet in my folder. "During those three years you earned the aggregate sum of \$37,583.57—upon which you paid income taxes."

Reagan frowned. "Who the devil are you?"

Peabody spoke up. "Oh, I'm sorry, but I forgot to introduce Mr. Anderson. He's from the Bureau of Internal Revenue, and it seems they're interested in safety deposit box robberies, though I don't know exactly why."

"To be specific, Dr. Reagan," I said, "the Bureau is curious as to how you managed to save \$40,000 on an income of \$37,583.57?"

Dr. Reagan's face slowly whitened. He wet his lips. "Save? Did I say anything about *save*? I *inherited* the money from my Aunt Bessie."

I drew a ball-point pen from my pocket. "Could I please have the full name of your Aunt Bessie? And the date she died? We like to check up on these things, you know. Of course you paid the inheritance taxes?"

Dr. Reagan began to perspire. He looked to his wife for help.

She laughed lightly and quickly. "Dear, you've been talking about inheriting the money for so long that sometimes you actually *believe* that it's already happened. But Aunt Bessie is still alive and kicking. Remember?"

Reagan wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. "Then how do we explain to the man how . . ."

"We *saved* the money, dear." Her voice was commanding. "And it wasn't *forty* thousand dollars. It was *four* thousand—on which we paid the income tax. Do you *understand*?"

He still seemed about to protest.

"*Dear*," his wife said firmly, "what *real* difference does it make to us now whether it *was* or *wasn't* forty thousand? It's all gone now anyway and evidently not covered by the bank's insurance—and you wouldn't want to go to jail for avoiding income taxes on an *imaginary* forty thousand dollars, now would you, Henry?"

He shook his head numbly. "I guess not, dear."

"And besides, Henry," his wife said, "just remember there's more where that came from."

He brightened. "That's right. If it took me only three years to . . ." He stopped, his face clouding. "But what about socialized medicine?"

His wife took him by the arm.

"We'll cross that bridge another time."

When they were gone, Miss Hinckle reappeared with coffee and sandwiches. "Time for a little break. No sense in overdoing things."

"Miss Hinckle," Peabody said, "I don't know what we'd do without you."

It took Peabody and me three days to interview all of the robbery victims and when we'd finished, I made the drinks.

"What does the total come to?" I asked.

"Our patrons claim they lost a total of two hundred and ten thousand dollars."

"And how much did we *really* get from those boxes?"

"Four hundred and sixty thousand dollars, thanks to tax dodgers like the Reagans and others."

"Good," I said. "That leaves us a net profit of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. I'll wrap up the other two hundred and ten thousand and send it to the police with an anonymous note saying that my conscience has been both-

ering me and I've decided to return the full amount. The case will not exactly be marked closed in their files, but no one is going to bother too much trying to catch the thief after the money has been returned. The heat will be off, so to speak."

Peabody smiled. "I have the feeling, though, that *some* individuals might have their doubts about whether *all* of the loot has actually been returned."

"In that case, they may take it up with the Bureau of Internal Revenue, though I have the strange suspicion that none of them will." I sipped my martini and smiled faintly. "For my part, it seems only reasonable that I ought to get fifty percent of our profits."

Peabody looked innocently at the ceiling and said, "Obviously my share ought to be fifty percent also."

"Not so fast, gentlemen," Miss Hinckle said firmly. "Since it was *my* idea, and I'm the one who brought the two of you together, we share and share alike."

